

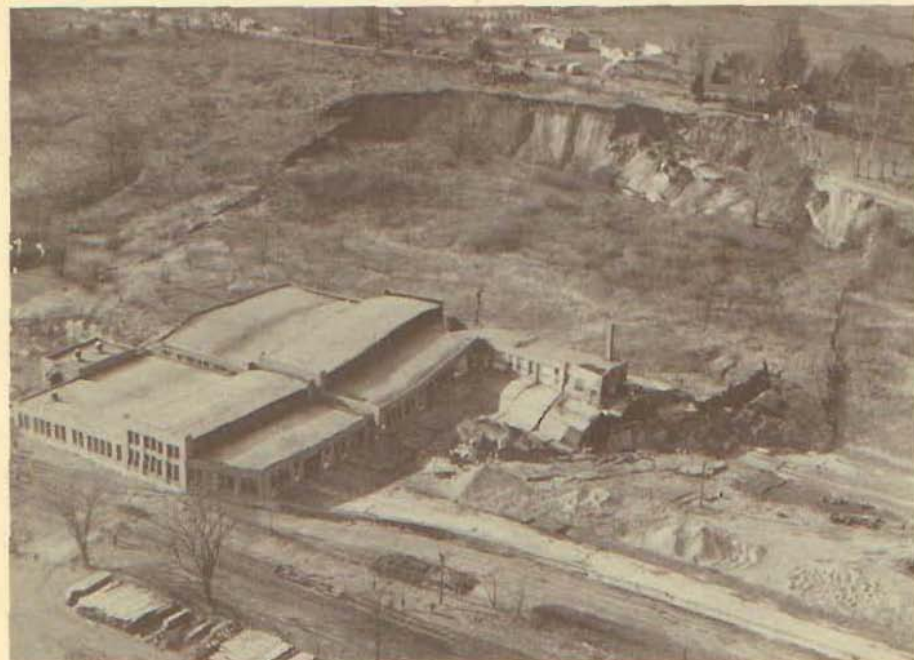
The Brecksville Landslide

With a noise described as a "hollow booming," a 500-foot-long slice of the eastern edge of Brecksville slid into the Cuyahoga River Valley during the early

morning hours of February 7, 1950. The largest landslide to occur in Ohio, the Brecksville slide destroyed a county highway garage, a large section of Fitz-

water Road, and a part of the B. & O. railroad tracks. The sudden movement of earth — not to be confused with an earthquake — also threatened the C. H. Fisher home, which later was moved to another site. Fitzwater Road was permanently closed, and the county garage site is now a weed-grown pile of rubble.

Several factors were responsible for this big earthslide which caused damages estimated at \$500,000, and various geologists stressed slightly different reasons. A Kent State University professor suggested the slide was due to artificial excavation at the foot or toe of an unsafe slope. The City of Cleveland was particularly interested in another theory that a leaky water main had lost enough water to cause the slide and that the city might therefore be liable for damages. Although water was the major culprit, the leaking water main had little or nothing to do with the disaster. Dr. Charles S. Bacon, a Case Institute of Technology geology professor, prepared a detailed map and report on the Brecksville landslide, noting that the heavy seasonal snows and rains had saturated and lubricated the thick lake clays along the lower reaches of the



The landslide in Brecksville, Ohio, in 1950 destroyed a county highway garage and parts of a nearby road and railroad tracks. (Photo by Fred Bottomer)

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Cuyahoga Valley. The leaky city water main was probably only an incidental source of water.

Professor Bacon's findings provided neither compensation nor consolation to the C. H. Fisher family, who had been awakened by workmen at 4:00 in the morning to be told that their house was about to plunge down the cliff. The Fishers evacuated their home, barely getting the family cars to safety before Fitzwater Road slid down a fifty-foot scarp, taking most of their front yard along with it. The house itself, except for the front porch, was salvaged a few days later and moved to a safer site at the juncture of Riverview and Fitzwater roads.

The potential for such a hazard as the Brecksville landslide exists wherever buildings are constructed at the edge of a steep slope on permeable, clay-rich soils. In some places homes have been built directly on top of slump blocks that have slid part way down the side of the valley and might be subject to further sliding at any time. The valley walls along the Cuyahoga are pockmarked by traces of other landslides that occurred in the more distant past. The highly unstable clays and silts responsible for the Brecksville landslide were deposits laid down in an ancient lake created by glacial ice damming the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. When this lake was drained, at the end of the last Ice Age, the modern Cuyahoga River began eroding its channel through the soft lake sediments, creating the steep, unstable cliffs that today form the valley walls.

Miraculously, no one was hurt in the Brecksville landslide. The sturdy concrete foundation of the Fisher home prevented it from falling over the edge of the landslide scarp. A night watch-



This photograph, taken soon after the landslide, shows the section of Fitzwater Road that was damaged.

man, who had entered the county garage shortly before the slide, recalled, "The building started to shake and tremble. I thought it was an earthquake. One wall collapsed and the windows started to break. I got out of there just in time." The garage floor was lifted some twenty feet and the building completely demolished, though most of the equipment inside was later salvaged. The B. & O. railroad tracks were raised more than three feet and thrust eastward nearly six feet. The eighty-foot-high brick chimney on the county garage, toppled by the earth slide, fell across the B. & O. tracks. An approaching diesel was flagged down, stopping twenty-five feet short of the ruined track, according to one account. Another account, however, reported that the train engine struck the chimney at a slow speed but "was not badly damaged."

Nearly thirty years after the Brecksville landslide, its scars are still very apparent. A small stream of water now flows along one edge of the slide scarp, while the county garage site has been consigned to the weeds. Chunks of the smokestack punctuate the landscape, amid jagged broken slabs of concrete flooring. Much of the actual slide, some 750 feet long, is now covered with scrubby aspen and rudimentary forest overgrowth, but the outlines of the slide and the hummocky, broken terrain are still clearly visible. Though cars once lined nearly a mile of Riverside Road, while curious sightseers came to inspect the disaster scene, the passing motorists today pay scant attention to the site of one of Ohio's most spectacular geologic cataclysms.

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